The Path Not Taken:

A Creative Interpretation of German History, Ludwig II of Bavaria, and the Centenary production of Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*

The question is often asked: how can the Germany of Goethe, Schiller and Bach also be that of Hitler, Goebbels, Goering—or even that of Helmut Kohl and the *Bundesbank*? Are the traditions of a nation barely cobbled together a hundred years ago from tremendously disparate elements so strong that they cannot be altered, is the identity of Germany as a national state so radically different from that of the smaller lands of Prussia, Bavaria, Hesse, Schleswig-Holstein and the like that there can be no going back in time, no rekindling of a far different spirit, one which existed scant years before all Germans paid homage to the house of Hohenzollern?

Perhaps the great tragedy of German history in the nineteenth century is the loss of these diverse and often incongruous regional voices which saw themselves drown out in the process of Otto von Bismarck's nation-building. Surely one of the strongest, most lasting of such voices belonged to Ludwig II of Bavaria (1845-1886), from the Royal House of Wittelsbach.[1]

The relationship between Ludwig II of Bavaria and Richard Wagner is of utmost importance as it brings into relief the issues of political power, sexual love, and artistic freedom which dominated not only the lives of the two men, but came to cast a long shadow over all of late nineteenth and early twentieth century German history. For as much as their respective biographers may war, Wagner's painting Ludwig as a mad, inhalant-abusing bisexual, Ludwig's casting Wagner as a money-sponging, megalomaniacal sycophant, both men set out from opposite poles of wealth and power to reach the same conclusions about individual existence, love, and the necessity of Art to the future of Germany, indeed as a prerequisite for civilized life itself.

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[1]Information on Ludwig II from Burg, Katerina. *Ludwig II of Bavaria*. Windsor: Swansea, England. 1989.

Both men, in short, were willing to sacrifice everything they owned, everything their creditors owned, their very lives in Ludwig's case, for the purpose of bringing to fruition tangible works of art to last through the ages, works which are rabidly individualistic yet which in time have ironically served as an entire nation's touchstone with an irretrievable past. The *Festspielhaus* at Bayreuth and Ludwig's castles, particularly Neuschwanstein, stand as examples of a Germany that could have been, aesthetically extravagant, decadent even, but nonetheless a culture geared more toward the Arts than toward war.

The remarkable parallels between the events in Wagner's *Ring* cycle and the life of Ludwig II point toward tragedy, not merely on stage, but in the political and aesthetic life of a nation. The path, which led Ludwig down to the shores of the Starnbergersee, where he would meet his end, may as well have been the same path that led Siegfried back away from the Rhine, and his final opportunity for freedom from the curse of the Ring. For both men, the path meant death, a literal or figurative stab in the back, the end of the dream of uniting Art and Love with Power. The same lust for power that would put Germany on a course for fiery destruction exhibits itself in the mysterious death of Ludwig II, the only monarch blocking Bismarck's desire for a militaristic, Prussian-dominated nation. For the Prussian monarchy, much like Hagen, the pursuit of power led to murder, and temporary gain, but the ultimate price was self-immolation. As we know, the German nation followed the Hagen and Hohenzollern calls to destruction. But what of the path not taken—the far shore, which Ludwig saw but never reached? What of the willful renunciation of power by Wotan in favor of self-knowledge, what of Siegfried's hearing and understanding the forest murmurs, the song of the birds? What of the path where no footprints lay, other than those of fictitious characters created by Wagner, or the very real steps of Ludwig II, a ruler for whom the love of art, the quest for self-knowledge and aesthetic perfection, came before the lust for political power? Myth so often begins where history leaves off, filling in the spaces of promise and potential shattered by the crude blows of reality. Perhaps the reason Wagner's Ring retains such

resonance even today, and the cult surrounding Ludwig II's embattled life and mysterious death remains so strong, is that both men pointed toward a Germany that might have been, but never was. And certainly, no path through history holds more allure or regret in the collective conscience of a nation than the path not taken.

Patrice Chéreau's controversial decision to set the Centenary Bayreuth production of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* during the late nineteenth century, roughly approximating the period of the work's debut, opens up tremendous possibilities for interpretation. While it lessens slightly the timeless mythological aspects of the drama, it certainly increases the social and political awareness with which a twentieth century audience might leave the festival after four nights.

In such a staging, the viewer is confronted more directly with the unpleasantness of recent German history, not to mention the composer's own less-than-savory beliefs concerning Judaism. The veil of the distant, mythologized past is rent, forcing upon the work a layer of meaning hitherto tacit or largely unexplored. The staging seems just, however, in the sense that internal conflicts and Freudian imagery specific to the nineteenth century literally inundate the work. Chéreau's presentation can thus serve as a touchstone for interpreting the Ring, without being called to account for inaccuracies or Wagnerite heresy. It merely suggests, rather than dictating, serving as a useful and fascinating parallel for the social and political events of the time, not a code book for deciphering previously hidden metaphors or innuendos.

The task of attempting to look for one-to-one correspondence between characters in Wagner's Ring and real life personages may be stretching the similarities too far. Instead, this creative interpretation of the Ring and the life and times of Ludwig II will focus on how certain threads of story in the Ring mirror or even *predate* the actual events in the life of Ludwig, the times of Germany and Europe as a whole. Life, as always, came to imitate Art, in this case the so-called "Art of the Future," which turned out to reflect the events of the very near future in Germany. Wagner cast his shadow across the future as both artist and visionary. His *Ring,* as seen through Chéreau's staging, paints a

remarkably accurate portrait of the constantly shifting and often violent tides of German history ebbing and flowing in the late nineteenth century.

If Chéreau's Wotan, certainly a wealthy landowner, likely a member of the German aristocracy, is given the power of a supreme god accorded the original Wotan in the libretto, then this power transformed by the earthly setting of the piece makes of him nothing less than a king, within his own realm. Wotan is tradition personified: royal bloodlines, monarchical power stretching back through the ages, self-absorbed in his ruling style. While this could fit the Hohenzollern monarchy aptly, Wotan's often dreamy self-examination and questioning of his own will, specifically from *Die Walküre* on, resembles closely the behavior of Ludwig II while in power.

The first we see of Wotan , he awakens from a dream, to find the castle Valhalla built to his specifications thanks in no part to his own efforts. Over his brief lifetime, Ludwig II ordered the construction of several palaces and residences, together with the mountain castle at Neuschwanstein, the last of which remained incomplete due to overexpenditure of the "Civil List", or royal allowance, on Ludwig's part and the gross mismanagement of funds on the part of his advisors.

Much of the design of these castles was based on medieval architecture, but magnified through the lens of Romanticism to take on giant proportions. It was no longer enough for turrets and towers to serve the purpose of defense, they became, as at Neuschwanstein, decoration as well; the defense not so much from enemies on the battlefield as from the diurnal duties of governance which Ludwig sought to escape in a lair of self-created splendor.

"Proudly rise/those glittering walls/which in dreams I designed" says Wotan early on in scene two of *Das Rheingold* . It was exactly in such dreams that Ludwig first imagined his castles, monuments not merely to his glory and power, but an escape from dull reality. Fricka views Valhalla as a home, a tangible place where she can keep an eye on Wotan, for who would ever wish to leave such a glorious place. But Wotan has more in common with Ludwig in that the castle *represents* power, is a metaphor for Wotan, not

an actual location as Fricka sees it, so that the body of the king himself (Wotan or Ludwig) must not carry the onus of absolute control (and self-control), but can rather become, as we shall see later, a "wanderer," making contact with the commoners, traveling through the forest by moonlight, an onlooker to action rather than the dictator of such action. For Ludwig, the castle said as much about who he believed himself to be, about the world in which he wished to live rather than the one in which he did in fact live.

The first question raised concerning Ludwig's love of architecture and spectacle on a grand scale compared to Wotan's, and indeed compared to Wagner's at Bayreuth, revolves around whether the desire to create such objects stems from megalomania and the questing for power, or whether true love, in this case the love of Art, is the impetus. For Wotan, though Valhalla is imagined in the dream-realm of creativity, it is clear, from the music (i.e., that the "Ring" motif is merely the minor version of Valhalla, suggesting a similar wellspring for the two) that his desire is to increase stature, for he is already all-powerful. Ludwig's dreams, on the other hand, revolved around escape, as he used Neuschwanstein and the surrounding mountains as a constant escape from the business of government in Munich.

Wagner, were he to portray any character, would certainly make a good Loge. As would-be advisor to Wotan, Loge tricks him with half-truths, then at other times inspires him and permits him to conquer his enemies, much as the intellect is wont to do. Wagner's fire of genius was fleeting, uncertain, consuming all it could, including much of Ludwig's money and patience, yet the young king could no more do without the flashing moments of pure artistic ecstasy which Wagner's work provided for him than he could without air, without food or water.

Thus, the difference among the three men—Ludwig, Wotan and Wagner—as regards the building of monuments to themselves lies in the purpose of these monuments. Ludwig's greatest work, the unfinished Neuschwanstein, provided an equally incomplete shelter from the schemes of political life that eventually spelled Ludwig's demise. Wotan's dream, Valhalla, was not meant to be lived in, only seen and worshipped from

the outside, entertaining the spirits of dead warriors, but not for escapist or bourgeois (as Fricka would like it) use, because Wotan himself as of *Das Rheingold* has not become the independent individual who can escape the prison of his "role" as a god. He is not yet the Wanderer.

Wagner's "temple" at Bayreuth is appropriate to Loge, in the sense that the building does not live separately from the music. Only when the "fire" of genius is ignited in the form of Wagner's operas does the structure come alive. This metaphor manifests itself even more clearly at the end of *Die Walküre*, to be explained later.

The building of the edifice of self, or edifice as a trope for the self, be it Bayreuth, Neuschwanstein or Valhalla, sheds light on the nineteenth century dilemma of coping with individual identity in the wake of the French Revolution (and, one might add, the upheavals of 1848, in which Wagner had a considerable role). Wotan is very much a creature of the nineteenth century, which is why Chéreau's staging once again works so well. Not merely for Schopenhauerian reasons, which I shall go into, but for the basic desire to separate who one is from what one does.

For as long as history has existed, Wotan has been corralled by his duties as a god, represented by the spear. He has been unable to "realize" his self outside of the role of god or husband. The spear/penis has not only been his power, it has been, in its own way, his curse. Much as Alberich renounces love in the opening scene, Wotan has, by virtue of his social position, renounced a degree of inner knowledge (the missing eye). It is at the confluence of love and knowledge of the self that Art is formed, thus producing the intriguing parallel of Ludwig to Wotan.

Ludwig always preferred opera to affairs of state, identifying himself time and again with Lohengrin, Knight of the Swan, who must leave the earth and return from whence he came when asked of his origins. So, it seemed, did the King of Bavaria hasten to disappear when official matters disrupted too much of his time spent in artistic pursuits or nocturnal journeys through the woods. Ludwig saw his castles as hiding places, whereas Wotan saw Valhalla as a concretization, a fossilization of his own power.

With Valhalla built, standing as metaphor for Wotan himself, there was no longer any need for Wotan the individual. Wagner, in the same way, created works, which formed an apotheosis of the name "Wagner." The name no longer referred to an individual, but to concepts, ideas, works, buildings.

Part of the magic of runes was this attribution of knowledge and ideas to symbols, and the transference of this knowledge, much as the runes that were carved on Wotan's spear, the spear itself, Valhalla. Wotan became the spear, the runes his words, his words the law. This was his predicament, and that of Ludwig (and Wagner) as well. Their identities were tangled up with their particular roles in life. Wotan tired of control, Ludwig tired of mundane duties and political intrigue, Wagner tired of the social taboos regarding marriage and monogamy under which he chafed. All dealt with the very real, yet very nebulous concepts of Romantic individuality. While Wagner learned to master his surroundings and expand his individuality into a "concept" of Wagner in a twentieth-century manner, Wotan allowed the fire first lit in his own mind to destroy him, a Schopenhauerian willful self-negation, while Ludwig was to meet Siegfried's fate of betrayal at the hands of his so-called friends.

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 forced Bavaria, and Ludwig, into a corner, diplomatically speaking. Ludwig's cousin and closest confidante, Empress Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary, for whom it is said he felt a greater affection than any of the male or female companions that frequented his Munich apartments, was allied by faith to the French cause, while Bavaria, despite its Catholic majority, came under the domination of Prussia and the "united" Germany of Otto von Bismarck under the rule of Kaiser Wilhelm I in 1871.

Not only was Ludwig once again forced into his role as Bavarian head of state, he was separated even more often, after her marriage and the subsequent ill will between the empires, from his beloved Elisabeth. Their trysts on the Roseninsel in the middle of the Starnbergersee came less and less frequently, as did their horseback rides in the Bavarian Alps. Married to a syphillitic Emperor of Austria, who was much older than she,

Elisabeth might be a candidate for Sieglinde, had she not fulfilled the dual role in Ludwig's life than Brünnhilde did for Wotan and Siegfried. She was, in a very real, physical sense, the truest love of Ludwig's life.

In a spiritual sense, however, Elisabeth took on all the meaning of everything lost to him—not merely Bavarian independence, but the inner life he had only fleetingly been able to pursue and express, and even then at the protests of his ministers and the constant harping of Wagner. As his cousin, as another man's wife, as Empress of a country at odds with his own, his relationship with Elisabeth was doomed from the beginning, but ironically, Ludwig may have seen eye to eye with his mercurial friend and inveterate debtor Wagner concerning social taboos. Wagner's blatant disregard for social morays in courting another man's wife (Cosima von Bülow), impregnating her, living thereafter in sin, paralleled Ludwig's own dalliances with a succession of male assistants.

So for Ludwig, his own will, all the secret desires of his innermost heart, separated from him by the duties required of him by the state (read: the sword), became personified in Elisabeth. She, like Brünnhilde, sympathized with this man who had absolute power in his kingdom, yet who could only think of the beauty of Art, of escape from daily life, of what he loved and desired most of all—recreating a Medieval past which never existed, with castles more spectacular than the originals, with operas which transported him to the realm of distant myth.

While Bismarck, suspiciously resembling Alberich, instructed his man on the inside of Ludwig's court, Max Holnstein, a senior aide and Hagen-like figure, to begin agitating for even greater Bavarian co-operation in the Prussian-led Germany than had been signed into effect at Versailles, Ludwig drifted more and more into his dreams. While his trysts with Elisabeth became fewer, he desired her more. While Wagner lived a rather contented life in exile in Switzerland, largely thanks to Ludwig's money, Ludwig could not even have the pleasure of seeing the work of the composer whom he rescued from obscurity. Aside from one surprise visit to Wagner, highly illicit should the Munich

papers have caught wind of it, the two men remained apart as Ludwig's power as a monarch appeared at low ebb.

By spending his energies elsewhere than on court intrigue and international power politics, Ludwig had damaged his credibility forever in the realm of the state. While he went on long walks through the forest, commissioned still more building projects, continued to pursue Wagner with the goal of convincing him to place the Wagner opera house in Munich, the jaws of a trap were being set, ready to be sprung, activated from hundreds of miles to the north, in Berlin.

If part of Ludwig's personality is reminiscent of Wotan, surely in the struggles Wotan had to face between his role as supreme god and keeper of laws and his desires for self-knowledge, another part of Ludwig reminded some, Bismarck among them, of "a boy who does not know his own mind...who lives in a world of dreams."[2]

Certainly in his naïvete, Ludwig recalls Siegfried, in his trust for those who would bring him harm. Siegfried's discovery of Brünnhilde on the rock is tantamount to Ludwig's awakening to the world beyond his dreamy boyhood. The element of fear that having fought through to a realm of the self previously guarded by intellect (fire) evokes is a direct result of learning one's own deepest desires, these desires in many ways being frightening. For Ludwig, Siegfried's statement, "This is no man," would not have been entirely applicable, for while he loved Elisabeth very much, his only public, formal relationship with a woman, an engagement to Elisabeth's scheming, power-hungry sister Sophie-Charlotte, ended in Ludwig's abandoning her shortly before the wedding date for the much-preferred company of, among others, his adjutant Paul von Thurn-und-Taxis.

Mirroring Siegfried in youth, in the sense of having to escape the bonds of the guardians who treated him both like a king and inhumanely, Ludwig learned a valuable lesson about himself in the aborted courtship of Sophie (though she in actuality sought him out); he learned the lesson that denying one's deeply felt desires leads to internal unrest, and external chaos. What he also learned is that while the dragon of one's own

[2] Ibid, p. 152.

irrational desires can be tamed momentarily, even killed if subdued for long enough, the dragon's blood will pour out into other corners of the personality.

Something else the young king kept hidden, other than his profound preference for male company, was the extent to which he actually believed himself a part of Wagner's operas, particularly Lohengrin. As life lacked drama and scale enough for Ludwig, he poured more and more of his attention and his money into aesthetic pleasures, chief of which was Wagner's semi-permanent establishment as preferred composer of the realm.

Ludwig's *Nothung* was the deep pockets of the Bavarian treasury, which allowed him powers beyond measure in pursuing the twin ideals of a new Bavarian opera house, to be led by Wagner and in which the composer's works would be performed, and the numerous castles sprouting up around the South Bavarian landscape. Unfortunately, what Ludwig failed to pay attention to at the time was the Prussian-fueled plot unfolding at the seat of his government in Munich, a regular Gibichung hall of traitors and immoral political climbers. While Ludwig took more and more time off to go riding in the hills, spent more entire days and weeks locked away in Neuschwanstein inhaling chloryl-hydrate for his headaches, which in turn brought him even fiercer headaches and hallucinations, events were moving apace toward his own personal "twilight," conceived by none other than his own aide, Max Holnstein, the Hagen of the piece who surely renounced love of his own Bavaria, if nothing else, to work for the Prussians.

As of 1886, Ludwig was isolated from everything he loved, from the world. Wagner had taken his money and built the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, not in Munich per the king's wishes. Ludwig merely requested a first, private viewing of the *Ring,* something he finally dragged out of Wagner—Ludwig could be insistent when it came to aesthetic matters. And if Wagner had previously provided escape from the pettiness of the political climate, which suffocated Ludwig, he now further added nostalgia on top of this, a nostalgia for Ludwig's lost childhood. Following the opening of the *Ring,* Ludwig retreated again to his mountain eyrie, less and less in the public eye, grown heavy, despondent, moderately drug-addicted, his Brünnhilde Elisabeth far away and not

responding to his letters, the sycophants lining up at the door for the money they'd heard the king was doling out in large sums to any artists whom he fancied.

Much as Siegfried's emergence in tuxedo at Gibichung hall stunned Brünnhilde, so did Ludwig's slow, passive acquiescence to the political forces scheming around him stun many of his well-wishers. Calling him "mad," many of the men who had once supported him sought to get rid of him, to inject him full of chemicals and throw him into a mental institution the way they had his younger brother Otto, ensuring the eventual succession to the throne of Ludwig's Prussophile uncle, Luitpold.

The doctors began treating Ludwig with more and more drugs, but he refused them. His power as a monarch within the realm dwindled to nothing thanks to isolation from the government, the power of his nation greatly enfeebled by unification in the Prussian, Hohenzollern "Germany," it would seem Ludwig could've been allowed to quietly live out his years, slowly succumbing to the wealth and power of industrialists in politics, a king without a kingdom, as was happening all across Europe to the smaller nations, and soon would to the larger ones.

Despite the abortive nature of much of the 1848 revolt across the Continent, the ideas behind the revolt, which Wagner had originally supported, continued seeping into the culture of power. Monarchy, thanks to generations of distancing from reality, became less able to judge its own obsolescence; but the statesmen unquestionably knew the score. Bismarck may have been dismissed once Kaiser Wilhelm's (read: Gunther's) objectives had been accomplished, but it was the Bismarcks of the world who would get the last laugh.

The Prussophiles at the Bavarian court would stand for nothing less than abdication of King Ludwig II. They devised a plan to have Ludwig once and for all declared insane and hauled off for "rehabilitation," much as his brother Otto had been mysteriously incarcerated years before. The political strong-arms, particularly Holnstein, strove to tear the ring of power from Ludwig's hand. He was given the "opportunity" to cede power, much as Siegfried is asked to give up the ring, before events spiral out of

control, but of course the monarch rejected this option, mainly because he suspected the motives of those who sought to strip the remnants of power in the decaying state of "Bavaria" from him.

Long before the contingent dispatched from the capital arrived at Neuschwanstein to declare the king insane and remove him from power, Ludwig had heard of their coming—for the peasants, most of whom still supported him, gathered around his castle to warn him and protect him. Ludwig refused to call out the Army, refused to have any of the conspirators arrested, but equally refused to go down without a struggle. He would not, could not according to all the vows he had taken upon ascending the throne, give up power simply because certain disloyal members of the government demanded it of him.

As the contingent took him away from Neuschwanstein, before the bewildered onlookers from the valleys around Füssen, to his new temporary "home" under house arrest at one of Ludwig's smaller castles on the shores of the Starnbergersee, the sense of outrage at the treatment of their king, no matter that he had not always been a sound decision-maker, permeated the entire crowd. Good Bavarians, and many of Ludwig's friends, including Elisabeth, when she heard the news of his detention, rushed to be of assistance in any way possible.

The same senseless violence that would mar the turn of the century and the beginning of the new century began in earnest in Bavaria in 1886. As hunters trust their lives to one another, as Siegfried believed himself to be in no danger surrounded by Hagen's men and Hagen himself, so Ludwig, always used to official if not cordial treatment, expected the same from Holnstein and the conspirators. He was to be greatly disappointed. Ludwig was originally confined to a small upstairs room in the castle, but when he failed to show any overt signs of madness, after surely any sane person would've been driven slightly batty by the cramped quarters, the conspirators had no choice (as they were attended by many non-conspirators who had seen Ludwig) but to let the king have daily exercise.

On June 12, 1886, in the evening, Ludwig and his doctor went for a stroll, the doctor having previously made the odd request that no nurse or guards accompany them. Meanwhile, a plan was afoot to free Ludwig—canoes had been paddling back and forth all day mere yards from shore near the path where Ludwig was accustomed to walking, despite the extremely inclement weather. Elisabeth was waiting for him across the lake on the Roseninsel, sight of their many trysts. As night fell and the doctor and Ludwig were nowhere to be found, the alarm went up, but slowly, for the conspirators also had a plan going—the plan to dispose of Ludwig once and for all.

Some hours later, after the king's body had been found floating in shallow water along with the doctor's, a hole ripped through the brim of Ludwig's hat, Holnstein declared what would go down as the official history of the incident: that Ludwig had drown himself and, in doing so, had had to murder the doctor first, who would otherwise have attempted to rescue him. This outlandish tale obviously never stood up with Ludwig's friends. It was, however, good enough at the time to allow for Luitpold to take the reins of power, and a short-lived power at that.

What the evidence of the scene of Ludwig's death in fact did show was a series of the king's footprints heading out into the water toward the Roseninsel, where all day the canoes had been seen plying back and forth. For Ludwig had received word from Elisabeth that she was waiting there for him, that help was on its way, that he would soon be free, whisked away over the mountains to Austria to be with her, just as he had always dreamed. And it was exactly at this moment that Ludwig, after his canoe failed to de-beach itself, began to wade out into the water, away from the doctor, toward his beloved Brünnhilde, symbol of everything sacred to him. The sight of the Roseninsel, of its glorious promise, was the last thing Ludwig saw in this life before a bullet struck and killed him from behind.

Elisabeth, distraught beyond comforting, spent the remaining years of her life dressed in black, mourning her beloved Ludwig, until she, too, would meet a similar fate at

the hands of another politically motivated assassin—stabbed in the back while walking the shores of Lake Geneva alone.

If Siegfried and Brünnhilde were finally to end up together in the afterlife, then perhaps there was hope for Ludwig and Elisabeth. For what Chéreau's staging decisively shows is the end of simple peasantry, dominated instead by the Brechtian city-scape on the banks of the Rhine for the final scene, and the end of the monarchy, of Wotan, but also of the aristocracy of the intellect. The killing of Ludwig II not only robbed Germany of one of its greatest patron of the arts, it ended forever the dream of the united Germany as anything other than a military or economically militant state. The great irony of history is that Bismarck's dream of a United States of Europe dominated by Germany has been realized, not in his time, but in our own.

Perhaps Ludwig's fate, much like Siegfried's, was preordained as a logical step in the elimination of monarchy in Europe. More troubling, however, is how distant the day seems when a political leader could also be a true patron of the arts, when the music of Richard Wagner, for example, could be given a life of its own and a venue of its own thanks to the generosity of a single individual. Moreover, Ludwig was perhaps the last leader of any nation whose focus in life was so exclusively on matters aesthetic, on creation, on leaving a heritage of splendor. For unlike Wotan, Ludwig's version of Valhalla did not burn up around him. His legacy certainly includes the castles, but can be said to stretch to the *Ring* itself, for without Ludwig's financial assistance, encouragement and belief in Wagner, the work surely would not have received an airing in the magnificent circumstances in which it did, at the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth built specifically for its performance. The fact that Wagner's greatest patron should have had a life as tragic and as extraordinary as Ludwig II speaks volumes of the times in which the two men lived. Ludwig has become, in his own right, exactly the sort of mythological being he always dreamt of. He inhabits a realm at which most of us today can only marvel. Ludwig literally made reality of his dreams; he beckoned for the world to follow him along his path, across the water to the Roseninsel, and beyond, but in the interests of politics, not

Art, of power, not love, Ludwig was murdered. The history of Germany since that time speaks for itself. By comparison, the fiery end of *Götterdämmerung* is a study in optimism.